

## A New Standard to Discuss Ancient Philosophy

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### Abstract:

The connection between ancient philosophy and modernity has to be facilitated via the elaboration of a new standard to discuss ancient philosophy. The philological work on ancient texts has to become complementary to a philosophical study of ancient wisdom which gives back to the subject its identity as source of innovations. To unveil the modernity of ancient philosophy is necessary that interdisciplinarity is accepted as part of the subject. More than this, humanities have to envisage themselves not in antithesis with science but as science, the science which studies what being human is.

**Keywords:** Traditional and Modern; Standards Reformed; Philological and Philosophical; Interdisciplinarity; Humanities and Science; Science of the Human

### I. A new standard to discuss ancient philosophy

It is usually required that researchers specialized in ancient philosophy are able to read the texts in which they have to work in the original language in which they were written. Surely, the idea of a human being who discusses the shade of meaning of an ancient Greek word, trying to contextualize the word in the line in which it is used, and the line in the specific passage where it occurs, can generate in the modern reader many interrogatives; easily, a large part of these interrogatives are brought about by the curiosity to know how a human being can genuinely be interested in a dead language, in a world which already imposes to know so many alive languages. Moreover, how can a person who *enjoys* discussing the meaning of a dead word can look like? Here the image of the researcher in ancient philosophy, in the mind of the modern reader, becomes that of the mummy, whose bandages are used as bookmarks. This individual can be a good company for a Halloween party but there is no other use for him or her in our real, modern, world.

I guess that many researchers in ancient philosophy have experienced a moment in their career in which they felt the need that their sarcophagus was opened; that said, we, as researchers in ancient philosophy, do know the importance to start our investigations from an accurate examination of the primary sources thus, we are fully aware of the importance of a thorough analysis of the words which compose these sources. How can we convince the modern reader that we are a good company also when the Halloween party is over? First of all, and this will be a recurrent concept in this piece, we have to make an effort to connect our studies with ideas which are familiar to the modern reader.

Contemporary readers create a new language constantly, they coin new terms, and these terms contribute to the evolution of the language. The evolution of the language, tells us the story of the evolution of humanity.

When we debate the meaning of an ancient Greek word, we are trying to render it in the most accurate way. The philological examination of the ancient texts, gives us the chance to captivate their essence; the choice of the words, the patterns that they construct, or that they do not construct, sheds light on the meaning of the text that we are taking into consideration. This helps us to render with more precision the philosophical message of the ancient Greek text. The research on ancient philosophy is interlaced with its philological consideration. Philological and philosophical studies are both essential in ancient philosophy. They are necessary, complementary, steps in the examination of a philosophy whose heritage is vital not only for modern philosophy but also for modern science and, as we will see, is very interesting for the wider public, too.

A good example of ancient Greek philosophy whose merits are important not only for modern philosophy but also for modern science is given by the atomic theory elaborated by Leucippus and Democritus in the 5th century B.C:

*Galen, On the Elements according to Hippocrates 1.2:*

'For by convention colour, by convention sweet, by convention bitter, but in reality atoms and the void' says Democritus, who thinks that all the perceptible qualities are brought into being, relative to us who perceive them, by the combination of atoms, but by nature nothing is white or black or yellow or red or bitter or sweet. By the expression 'by convention' he means 'conventionally' and 'relative to us,' not according to the nature of things themselves, which he calls by contrast 'reality,' forming the term from 'real' which means 'true.' The whole substance of this theory is as follows. People think of things as being white and black and sweet and bitter and all the other qualities of that kind, but in truth 'thing' and 'nothing' is all there is. That too is something he himself said, 'thing' being his name for the atoms and 'nothing' for the void. All the atoms are small bodies without qualities, and the void is a space in which all these bodies move up and down for ever, or somehow get entangled with one another or collide or rebound, and in these contacts they separate and combine again, thus making all combinations including our bodies and their states and perceptions. They think that the primary bodies are incapable of being affected (some, such as the followers of Epicurus, taking them to be invulnerable because of their hardness, others, such as the followers of Leucippus, to be indivisible because of their smallness), and incapable of any change in those qualities which all men, taught by their senses, have believed in; thus they say that none of them becomes hot or cold, or dry or wet, much less turns black or white or suffers any qualitative change of any kind. (Translation by Taylor 1999, 143-144)

In these lines Galen summarises a crucial concept in the atomism: all the qualities that we perceive are just a convention because the truth is that the only existing elements are the atoms and the void. The subject of this article is not the atomism, thus I am not going to illustrate how atomism is treated by Leucippus, Democritus and Epicurus; for the scope of this piece it is sufficient to know

that they agreed in the recognition that the reality is given by atoms and void. This is an intuition which is utterly brilliant; in fact, its value has been openly acknowledged during numerous conferences given by physicists that I attended. Strangely, when I listened to researchers in ancient philosophy who were presenting the atomism, they rarely highlighted the extraordinary value that the intuitions of the atomists have, in contemporary science and philosophy. Surely, you can think that I do not know the right researchers in ancient philosophy. This may be the case, but both when I listen to researchers in ancient philosophy and when I read their studies, I realize that most of the research in ancient philosophy, even when it presents characters which are shockingly modern, as in the case of atomism, tends to begin and end within the boundaries of ancient philosophy. If there is a connection with modern science or philosophy, this connection is merely mentioned or, at most, developed in few lines. This is a tendency which should be radically changed. As researchers in ancient philosophy, we should encourage the dialogue with researchers in other fields. In this way, we would draw attention to the fact that not only ancient philosophy has philosophical merits as other philosophical fields, but that it can also be an active part in the establishment of a fruitful dialogue among fields of inquiry, as I will illustrate in the next section of this piece, treating the subject of interdisciplinarity.

There is one last point concerning the quotation from Galen cited above that I want to take into consideration: Galen explains that Democritus, when he wants to draw a contrast between what is believed by convention, what appears to the senses, and what really is, he uses the opposition between convention defined as *nomos* and nature defined as *eteē*. Normally, the distinction between convention and nature would have been defined in terms of a contrast between *nomos* and *phusis* (on this point see Taylor 1999, 9 and DK 68 B 49) but Democritus has coined a new term, *eteē*, to indicate the reality. When we point to the coinage of a new term by Democritus to define reality we are doing a philological work which potentially could make us come back to the Halloween mood that I mentioned at the beginning of this piece. But the risk can be avoided if we focus on the *function* of this philological work: Democritus wants to underline that he, for the first time, has understood what our world is. He wants that this discovery is highlighted by the birth of a new word. At the beginning of this piece I observed that contemporary readers create a new language constantly. They can coin new words in connection with the development of new technologies, as it happens with the use of the term YouTuber. Democritus, with no advanced technology at his disposal, coined a new term to let us know what our *reality* is. He understood that the real is given by atoms and void in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. This intuition has never ceased to be a bright star of thought. The light of this star is so bright that it gives us the chance not only to stress the importance of ancient philosophy for the current philosophical debates but also to stress the crucial role of ancient philosophy in the development of a dialogue among different fields of inquiry and with the wider public, as will be emphasized in the next sections of this work.

## 2. Ancient philosophy and interdisciplinarity

The atomism is only one of the many examples which can be taken from ancient philosophy to show the philosophical significance of the subject. As I emphasized in the previous section of this piece, the importance of the subject is not limited to the progress of the subject itself but it is related also to other fields of inquiry. Thus, ancient philosophy should take advantage of the possibility created by its investigations, and should start a dialogue with other branches of philosophy and other fields of inquiry, too. In the first part of this article, I have used the atomism to show the relevance of ancient philosophy to contemporary science. Now I want to utilise an example taken from my own work, because it gives me the chance to discuss not only its final result but also the stages, and the difficulties, which characterized its development. In my book, *Plato and Intellectual Development: A New Theoretical Framework Emphasising the Higher-Order Pedagogy of the Platonic Dialogues*, I present my theory according to which

Platonic texts promote rational development through a higher-order pedagogy: Plato has not written a textbook whose content can merely be summarized by the readers. He has created a text to which they are required to respond and the act of responding to the text is as important as the text itself: the two of them taken together complete Plato's task. If we want to use an image to express this concept, we can compare a textbook to a "bidimensional" way of conveying thoughts, in which the only two dimensions accepted are given by the author's thinking and the words that he uses to express it. Plato does not want to convey a static description of how things are. He has created a text that calls out for completion by the readers' further contributions. This does not mean that Plato's words are incomplete in the sense that they communicate thoughts which have not yet reached a good degree of elaboration. On the contrary, it means that the words written by Plato are so well mastered by their author that they are able to stimulate the reader to overcome them... In this way, Plato is adding a further dimension to his texts: they are not only composed by words which have the goal of expressing the thinking of their author but they comprise the thinking of their users, too. The readers of Plato's texts occupy a third dimension which adds rational volume to Plato's work. (Saracco 2017, 16)

We are not here to discuss this theory and, obviously, the scope of this piece is not to present in an exhaustive way my research thus, there will not be in this article sufficient elements to criticise the weaknesses, or appreciate the strengths, of my work. As I said, here I want to present the stages of development of an intuition that I had, in order to create an occasion to discuss the necessity that ancient philosophy opens up itself to the collaboration with other subjects. At the beginning of my investigation about Plato's words used as intellectual stimulations of the reader<sup>1</sup>, I took into consideration the fact that Plato chose to convey his thinking exclusively by writing dialogues. I emphasized that for Plato that was not a mere formal choice but a philosophical decision, a specific *request for collaboration* from the writer to his reader (Saracco 2017, 13). In order to clarify the nature of this request for collaboration, I relied on the theories of modern pedagogists. Of course, doing so, I was not trying to demonstrate that Plato could foresee these developments of modern

scientific debates. I was using modern science because what Plato was doing was pertinent to modern science as well as what the atomists discovered in the 5<sup>th</sup> century b. c. is pertinent to modern theories about atoms and void. Obviously, the atomists in the 5<sup>th</sup> century b. c. could not foresee the modern scientific discoveries centred on the atoms; similarly, Plato could not foresee what Vygotsky and Kohlberg discovered about pedagogy. Nevertheless, this does not mean that there is no plausible connection between the atomists of the 5<sup>th</sup> century b. c. and modern scientists or that there is no plausible connection between Plato's pedagogy and modern theories about pedagogy. In fact,

Vygotsky highlights how cooperation allows learners to work with people who know more than they do (Vygotsky 1986, 189). When we, as learners, are challenged by someone who knows more than we do, this stimulation makes us gradually leave what we are able to do to move in the direction of a successive phase of rational development. When this kind of cooperation takes place the person who knows less does not merely absorb notions transmitted by the person who knows more. The person who knows more uses her intellectual maturity to stimulate intellectually the learner, offering in this way a rational guidance which is not compulsion to be the same rational entity that the person more intellectually developed is. This exposure to the reasoning of someone who has reached a high level of intellectual development is, according to Kohlberg (Kohlberg 1981, 27), well portrayed by the Socratic questioning, in which the interlocutors of the philosopher are challenged by a more refined reasoning than theirs. In fact, Socrates' methodological sophistication is informed by his capability of recognizing ignorance. Socrates has acquired a clear awareness of how partial one's knowledge can be, even though it may seem that it possesses no deficiency (Apology, 21 d). This intellectual maturity is not utilized to transform Socrates' interlocutors into rational copies of the philosopher. As Kohlberg notices, if teachers used Socratic questioning, they would stimulate their "students in such a way as to arouse disagreement and uncertainty as to what is right" (Kohlberg 1981, 27) and this would "stimulate stage growth": (Kohlberg 1981, 27) the involvement in a dialectical exchange with someone intellectually more sophisticated than we are, opens up a cognitive horizon characterized by a controversiality that has to be analysed using our critical skills. (Saracco 2017, 13-14)

When I was doing the research which gave me the chance to write the passage quoted above, I was astonished to realize how much the learning sciences are indebted to ancient philosophy. Vygotsky emphasized the importance of the existence of a cooperation between a learner and a person who knows more than we do. This importance is not given by the fact that a learner has to merely absorb the notions presented by the person who has reached a superior stage of intellectual maturity. On the contrary, the person who possesses a superior level of cognitive refinement, challenges the learners so that they realize that what they had the habit of accepting passively can be criticized. In this way, the learners are able to overcome the intellectual stage in which they are, growing intellectually. Kohlberg, as indicated in the excerpt above, explicitly ascribes to the Socratic questioning the capability of promoting the intellectual maturity of his interlocutors. Socrates' interlocutors are stimulated by the philosopher to recognize a fact that is very clear in Socrates' mind: ignorance is the distinctive trait of *everyone's* knowledge. Kohlberg recognizes the crucial importance

of the Socratic questioning, related to its capability to create a controversiality whose exploration is crucial to grow intellectually. In fact, he explicitly invites the teachers to use the Socratic questioning to promote the cognitive development of their students.

Only few considerations taken from Kohlberg's work are sufficient to show that it is possible a dialogue between ancient philosophy and other disciplines. But those few words point at much more than that: ancient philosophy *already* has a place in modern debates, there is an *existing* dialogue in which modern science and ancient philosophy actively exchange their knowledge. So, the problem does not seem to be the recognition by other disciplines of the value of ancient philosophy. The problem is a tendency *within* the field of ancient philosophy to *not* communicate with experts in other branches of philosophy or in other fields of inquiry. I mentioned the fact that contemporary scientists acknowledge the value of the intuition of the atomists and thus they explicitly acknowledge their debt to ancient philosophy. Again, in the excerpt quoted above, we see an explicit recognition of the value of ancient philosophy, not only in contemporary *theories* of education but also in their *practice*, since Kohlberg explicitly encourages the teachers to utilise the Socratic questioning to stimulate intellectually their students.

When I spoke with experts in the learning sciences, they were conscious of the contribution of the Socratic dialogue within the field but, strangely, experts in ancient philosophy are usually resistant to collaborate with researchers who work in other fields of inquiry. This leads to the paradoxical situation, that I have already mentioned when I took into consideration the intuitions of the atomists in relation to modern physics, in which experts in ancient philosophy are not aware of the relevance of the field across the disciplines. This tendency to make the research on ancient philosophy begin and end within ancient philosophy does render extremely difficult for the researchers to develop new perspectives to analyse the work of ancient philosophers. Nevertheless, these new angles to appreciate ancient philosophy are vital for the establishment of the role of the subject *today*. Thus, it is necessary that ancient philosophy updates the standards on which researchers can operate *within* the field: being part of the field cannot mean no communication with other branches of philosophy or with other fields. On the contrary, the communication with other fields of inquiry has to be promoted, as a good means to highlight the relevance of ancient philosophy to the progress of contemporary knowledge.

### **3. Science of the human**

I have just taken into consideration Kohlberg's acknowledgment of the value of the Socratic dialogue and his explicit suggestion that teachers employ this kind of dialectic interaction to favour the rational development of their students. I have utilised the learning sciences, to develop my theory about a higher-order pedagogy, devised by Plato to stimulate the epistemic capacities of his readers via the written words. This research is not the subject of this piece. Nevertheless, as in the previous part of this article, I want to use my work, because it gives me the chance not only to present an example pertinent to my argumentation but also to describe the hurdles related to the elaboration

of these theories. These difficulties can be helpful as a starting point for a reflection on whether and how the standards within the field of ancient philosophy have to be reformed.

In the previous sections of this article I have focused my attention on the importance that ancient philosophy be in dialogue with other fields of inquiry. Now I want to take into consideration the necessity that ancient philosophy be in dialogue also with the wider public. I have developed a project for children 8-12 years old. These young students will be the protagonists of an online dialogue in which children who attend schools in upper class, middle class, and under resourced communities will work together to face the challenges presented by learning units that I have elaborated beginning from Plato's philosophy<sup>2</sup> (Saracco 2017, 125-138; Saracco 2016 a; Saracco 2016 b). One of these units starts from the considerations about justice elaborated in the first book of the *Republic* by Polemarchus: he claims that it is just to give benefits to friends and harm to enemies but Plato invites the reader to reflect on the possibility that mistakes can be made and you can believe that someone is your friend but actually he or she is not<sup>3</sup>. Thus, if you think that just people can harm their enemies and you make a mistake judging who the enemies are, you will harm someone who was not unjust. Children are invited to reflect on this possibility, using an example taken from their everyday life:

Imagine having a friend since starting school. When you begin school you are in the same class with him, and you have the same teachers. Over the years you have become very good in Math while he has problems understanding it. He is your friend so you try to help him by explaining Math but when you realize that he cannot understand, you give him the permission to copy your homework. The homework is correct; there is only a minor error. But that error is the same for you and your friend and the teacher notices. When the teacher asks for explanations you are sure that your friend will tell him what happened but, on the contrary, he states that you copied the homework off his paper when he wasn't looking. If he had seen that you were copying he would have stopped you. Another schoolmate, who was present when you were trying to explain Math to your friend but with whom you have never talked, raises his hand and explains everything to the teacher so you are not blamed for copying. The person you thought it was just to help because he was your friend turned out to be an enemy and an unknown person behaves as a friend (Saracco 2017, 131-132)

In another unit, children have to face the challenges related to the concept of justice presented by Thrasymachus in the first book of the *Republic* according to which justice is the advantage of the stronger<sup>4</sup>:

In a class there is a student who is physically very strong, and he constantly beats another student to steal his snacks. He thinks that it is very advantageous having all those snacks for free, and you think that it is very advantageous for you to help him to steal the snacks of the weak student. That way you keep on the good side of the bully. But one day both of you discover that the weak student is very strong in science, but, of course, he will never help the two of you to understand that subject, and you constantly get Fs.

Do you think that it is always easy to distinguish what is advantageous from what is bad for you or who is stronger from who is weaker? It can happen, as in the situation I have just described, that what seemed advantageous turns out to be bad for you, and the person who seemed very weak has his own type of strength. What is your opinion? Do you think that we can always know what is advantageous for us or who is weak? (Saracco 2016 a, 473)

The two examples that I have just cited are only *parts* of the learning units that I have devised. As I said, this article does not offer enough elements to judge my work; in fact, here my goal is not that of presenting my work to give the readers the chance to evaluate its strengths or faults. Rather, I am using my work because I know what were the difficulties related to its development. These difficulties may be helpful to begin to reflect upon the need to change the standards on which a research within ancient philosophy is usually developed. Moreover, I am using my work as an example of the possibility that ancient philosophy, in dialogue with other fields, in this case the learning sciences and philosophy of technology, can reach the wider public. As I discussed in the previous section of this article we, as researchers in ancient philosophy, should be more open to the dialogue with other fields of inquiry because this would help us to develop innovative perspectives to work on ancient philosophy. These perspectives could demonstrate that philosophy can have a leading role in the dialogue between the academy and the wider public, reinforcing in this way the importance of ancient philosophy within the field of philosophy.

There is an ongoing international debate about the role of the University in a time of international socio-economic crisis. Researches are funded by governments via the money of citizens who need to know whether the researchers are developing ideas which can be solutions to their problems. The project for children that I have elaborated is one example of how ancient philosophy can prove to be helpful also in everyday life. Young students who come from different socio-economic backgrounds are in dialogue with each other. They cooperate to elaborate reflections on themes whose critical evaluation will help them to make decisions in their everyday life. In fact, it is important that students evaluate critically the possibility that you can make mistakes when you judge a person; thus, you have to pay a lot of attention when you think that it could be just to harm someone, because it could be the case that this person will be the one who will help you when you are in difficulty. In the second example taken from my research, the students will reflect on a very actual issue, the problem of bullying in schools: they are invited to reflect on the notion of strength, to recognize that physical strength is not the only possible kind of strength; in this way young students will have the chance to reflect critically on their behaviour with the other classmates. I have only presented *sections* of the learning units that I have elaborated, but these few excerpts can give an idea of how ancient philosophy can be in dialogue with non philosophers. Ancient philosophy can be a good example of how philosophy can sharpen the critical skills of the wider public: it shows that the same situation can be evaluated from different perspectives, helping the non philosophers to experience the fact that different points of view are important resources, when a challenging situation has to be faced.



Ancient philosophy can be used to present difference as a resource rather than an obstacle (Saracco 2016). In this way this branch of philosophy can display to the wider public the importance of our cultural heritage. When we realize that the past can be helpful to recognize the mistakes that we make in the present we can also start a reflection of what we, as the past of future generations, want to leave as our heritage. Thus, ancient philosophy can be a precious resource to develop in the youth the conscience of the importance of the trace that they are leaving. This is crucial for a generation whose words, thanks to technology, have immediate resonance.

A use of ancient philosophy that proves its effects in everyday life contributes to underline its importance within the field of philosophy; more than this, when ancient philosophy reaches with efficacy the wider public confirms that humanities *are* science, the science whose subject *is* the human. This is a further stimulus to be in dialogue with *every* field of inquiry that can be helpful to render the extraordinary innovative power of the thoughts of the ancient philosophers. Ancient philosophers prove that history and tradition have not necessarily to be in contrast with innovation and modernity. On the contrary, the courage of the researchers of the past has a lot to teach today. We, as researchers in ancient philosophy, have the challenging task to demonstrate that we have learned from the brave innovators of the past.

#### Endnotes:

1. About this aspect see Susanna Saracco, "The Symposium and the Role of Literature for Epistemic Development." *Athens Journal of Humanities and Arts, Special Issue on 'Ideas of Plato in the Philosophy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century'* 5. 1 (2018): 61-81.
2. In this article I am not going to enter the debate about whether or not Plato can be considered an elitist. Nevertheless, I want to quote few significant lines taken from the *Republic*: "education is not what some people declare it to be, namely putting knowledge into souls that lack it, like putting sight into blind eyes... the power to learn is present in *everyone's* soul... education... isn't the craft of putting sight into the soul. Education takes for granted that sight is there but that it isn't turned the right way or looking where it ought to look, and it tries to redirect it appropriately." (*Republic*, VII 518 b5-d7. My emphasis).
3. *Republic*, I 334 b7- d6.
4. *Republic*, I 339 a3.

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